Title: "Concrete Heat"
Genre: Urban Romance / Smut
Word Count: ~10655 words

The night air buzzed over Manhattan's Lower East Side—humid, electric, charged with the pulse of people who lived for midnight. Neon smeared the sidewalk as tall buildings held in the heat like a secret. Asha Rivera, all leather boots and fire-red curls, stormed out of the club's backdoor like she owned the block.

She needed air. More importantly, she needed distance—from him.

"You didn't say goodbye."

His voice was a rich baritone, dipped in control and low-pitched warning. Of course, Khalil DeWitt had followed her. Tall, tailored, and emotionally armored, he leaned against the alley wall like it was part of his kingdom. A Capricorn sun with Saturn tattoos on his wrist, he always looked like he'd rather be working—until he saw her.

"You don't own me," Asha snapped, pacing in tight circles. "You don't get to pull me into your corner like some deal you're closing."

Khalil didn't blink. He just folded his arms, slow and heavy. "You kissed me. You started it. Don't act like you don't want the follow-through."

Asha's nostrils flared. Her fire was too big for her body, too bold for most men. Most backed off. But Khalil was no ordinary man. His restraint wasn't fear. It was a strategy.

She stalked toward him, hips swinging like a dare. "You're obsessed with control, Mr. CEO. Your suit probably cost more than my rent."

"I like order," he said coolly, eyes flicking to her lips. "Disorder makes bad business."

"Oh?" She leaned in close, her breath brushing his neck. "Then why do you keep inviting chaos?"

He caught her wrist before she could pull away, fingers firm but not rough. "Because you're the only kind of chaos I crave."

They'd met a month ago at a gallery opening—her roommate's last-minute invite. She showed up in silver spiky heels, red parachute pants and a white crop top, grabbed two glasses of prosecco, and talked shit about the art to anyone within earshot. Khalil was standing by a sculpture, sipping cognac and watching—-Her. They locked eyes. Instant vibe check.

He was the investor. She was the artist's wild roommate who had no interest in rules, champagne, or introductions.

She thought: *Too clean. Too calm. Not my type.*

He thought: *She's gonna fuck up my life.*

Neither of them walked away.

She tried to bait him with messy flirting. He didn't bite. Just watched her like he was waiting for her to level up. That made her *insane*. She caught Khalil's eye from across the room as she grabbed a third glass of prosecco. He watched her, expression unreadable—but his eyes burned. Asha knew the look. The careful man intrigued by the reckless woman.

And she was reckless. Born under Mars, her Aries sun kept her hot, impatient, lust-hungry. She lived fast, fucked faster, and trusted no one but her gut.

Khalil, born on a January frost, was the opposite. All earth and ambition. A Capricorn man who mapped every move. But beneath his cold front was a body carved by discipline—and a desire so deep, it scared him.

She attempted to seduce him that night. Pulled him into a supply closet. He hadn't touched her then. Just looked. Said, "I don't rush things."

That was when she decided to make him hers.

Flash forward, four months later. Rain hadn't touched the pavement yet, but the air was thick with it — the kind of pressure that makes your skin tingle before the storm hits. Asha's heels clicked sharp against the wet bricks, her blood still humming from the bass inside Velvet Saint — the kind of club where secrets sweat out between strangers and bad decisions wear designer cologne. She lit a blunt with shaky fingers, not from nerves but from anticipation. All night long, she could feel a slight tension, a feeling that tonight was going to be one for the record books. Then she heard him.

That voice — low, smooth, too damn steady for a night like this.

'Didn't think I'd see you here tonight, Firestarter."

Khalil.

Asha didn't turn. Not yet. She let the silence stretch like silk between them, her lips curling into a slow, dangerous smile.

As thunder rumbled far off, Asha spun around and pushed against Khalil's chest. " Why are you following me?"

He didn't speak. He pulled her close and kissed her.

It wasn't gentle. His mouth was bruising, hard with held-back need. He bit her lip like he was claiming it, one hand slipping into her hair, pulling her closer. And she—by the gods, she melted and exploded all at once.

"Take me home," she growled, breath hitching.

His hand slid down her spine. "I have a board meeting in six hours."

"I don't care."

That made him smile—she responded exactly how he hoped she would.

His penthouse was glass and steel—sharp, expensive, impersonal. She kicked off her heels and unzipped her leather skirt while surveying the layout. "You actually live in this place, or just perform in it?"

He watched her from the kitchen, unbuttoning his cuffs. "I perform for shareholders. Not for you."

Asha smirked. "We'll see."

The moment he reached her, she pushed him against the counter. She kissed him like it was a fight—fast, wild, teeth and tongue. He groaned, finally gripping her hips and lifting her onto the marble counter.

"Slow down," he murmured.

"No," she whispered against his jaw. "Make me."

He cursed under his breath. Her tank top was off in seconds, her breasts in his hands, her back arching with a moan. "You feel like fire," he muttered, dragging his mouth down her throat. "I knew you would."

She undid his belt with fast fingers, no patience, tugging until his pants dropped to the floor. He was hard already—thick, heavy, proud. The Capricorn in him wanted control, but his body had clearly surrendered.

Asha licked her lips. "I want to ride you."

He chuckled darkly. "You want to tame me?"

“No,” she said, wrapping her legs around him. “I want to make you beg.”

He carried her to the bedroom, placed her on the bed like a queen, then tore off his shirt. His chest was taut and smooth, cut with abs and the faintest dusting of hair. Asha reached down to touch his thickness, but he caught her wrist.

“Not yet.”

He pinned her arms above her head and kissed her slowly —like a punishment. He teased her with lips and tongue, taking his time mapping every moan she made. His mouth found her nipples and he sucked just hard enough to make her curse.

She was writhing. “Don’t tease me.”

“You teased me for weeks.”

“Fair,” she gasped.

His hand slipped between her thighs. She was dripping wet. He growled low in his throat.

“You like it when I take my time.”

“No,” she panted.

“Yes.” He slid two fingers inside her, curling them just right. Her back arched like a bowstring. As she curved into his hand, he slowly withdrew his sticky fingers and placed them in his mouth.

“Mmmm, you taste just like caramel and sweet dreams. Just like I knew you would.”

Eyes wild, a short laugh burst from Asha’s heaving chest . “You are so slow.”

“You are so delicious.”

And it was true. He drank from her love cup until her legs were shaking, until her thighs quivered, until she was swearing at the ceiling.

Only then did he slide into her—slow, deep, devastating.

She cried out. “Fuck, Khalil.”

He gripped her hips, controlling the rhythm, slow and deliberate. “Say my name again.”

“Khalil—God—faster!”

“No.”

He watched her unravel beneath him, a perfect mess. He held back, hips grinding, never losing control. But she saw it in his eyes—the dam cracking.

“Let go,” she whispered, pulling him close. “You don’t have to hold it all in with me.”

Staring deeply into his eyes, Asha whispered,” Please.” He froze and stared back into her eyes. “Please,” Asha repeated. Asha gently kissed Khalil on his cheeks, neck, and shoulders quietly repeating “Please” over and over. As Asha assured Khalil, his body tensed as he thrust deeply into her. He could feel himself exploding into her warmth as she said, “Please, Khalil, please. Let go; I got you.” Overwhelmed, Khalil released all of himself into Asha. He collapsed beside her, chest heaving, lips on her shoulder, empty and full at the same time. He could not let her see his face because he felt his heart open wide. In a single instant, Khalil realized that he believed her. Yes, Asha truly does have him.

Breaking the silence, Asha laughed breathlessly. “So much for that board meeting.”

The night seemed to stretch out endlessly before them. Together it seemed that time had stopped. They lay in silence watching the city lights paint patterns on the wall

“You exhaust me,” he said eventually.

“Good.” She grinned and turned to face him. “You ground me. I think that’s why I like you.”

He ran his fingers through her hair. “You drive me insane.”

“And you make me slow down,” she whispered. “That’s not easy to do.”

They stared at each other—Mars and Saturn, fire and stone. Not a perfect match on paper. But their chemistry didn’t care. The city below was loud, chaotic, and ever-changing. Just like her. And Khalil? He was the one man who could build a foundation in the middle of her storm.

“I’m not looking for forever,” Asha warned.

“Neither am I,” he lied.

But the way he pulled her close said otherwise. Once more, skin to skin, her fire against his ice. Each time she tried to take control—pull him down faster or deeper or arching her back—he flipped her, pinned her wrists above her head, and kissed her *slow*.

The kind of kiss that makes your knees weak and your soul suspicious.

“You like me,” he nibbled into her ear.

She whimpered. “No.”

He smiled against her neck. “Liar.”

His mouth moved down, teasing, tasting. Her nipples, her stomach, the inside of her thigh. He kissed like a man with a mission, one who knew *exactly* how to handle a woman who usually handled everyone else.

She was soaked by the time his fingers slid in. And when he finally—finally—pushed inside her, it was deep, thick, and slow enough to make her see gods she didn’t believe in.

“Fuck.”

“Say it again.”

“Fuck, Khalil.”

He worked her open like a luxury investment—slow build, long game, high reward. She tried to flip it, ride him, control the pace, but he grabbed her hips, set his own rhythm. Firm. Focused. Filthy.

He grunted, shoved deeper.

“Asha, please…”

“Round three,” Asha whispered while still catching her breath. Khalil scooped her limp body into his strong arms and nuzzled against her cheek.

“You’re a lot,” he said finally.

“You’re... not,” she replied.

“I take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

There was a long silence, the kind that didn’t feel heavy. It just *was*.

“You hungry?” he asked.

She blinked. “Like, food?”

“Yeah; what do you like? I’ll order delivery,” he said, already reaching for his phone. “Or was this just a vibe and dip?”

“You’re very… hospitable after sex.”

“Wasn’t just sex, Asha.”

Her heart skipped.

“I know you’re not a forever type,” he added, voice low. “But you’re not disposable, either.”

Uncharacteristically bashful, Asha lowered her eyes to hide the unexpected happiness that coursed through her heart. Though she remained silent, her mind shouted, “Pretend? A vibe and a dip? Never that, Khalil…you are never that!”

Part Two: Ghosts in the Morning

The morning light filtered through Khalil’s penthouse like gold spilled on glass. Asha blinked into it, disoriented, wrapped in 800-thread-count sheets and the heavy scent of sex and man.

She stretched slowly, sore in all the right places.

He wasn’t beside her.

Of course not. Capricorn men rose before dawn, even after the best night of their lives. She could hear the low hum of conversation—his voice on the phone, clipped and calm, making money before breakfast.

Asha reached for her phone and saw it:

1 New Message from: Jayden 😈
3:01 AM

> *You still dream about me, Red? Do you miss me?*

She sat up, heart pounding.

He was back.

Asha sat up like she’d been electrocuted. Her stomach flipped.

Not him. Not today.

It had been six months. A full no-contact cleanse since Jayden ghosted after their final toxic meltdown. She had screamed at him in the rain outside a bodega—full rom-com energy minus the resolution. *“Say you love me or GTFO!”* He GTFO’d.

No closure. No explanation. Just radio silence.

Until now.

She stared at the text, heart hammering. Of course he came crawling back the *morning after* she finally let someone else in. Of course he sensed it. That was Jayden's whole brand: stupid chaotic timing, maximum emotional damage, with a waaay too satisfying dick experience.

"Coffee?" Khalil's voice pulled her back to Earth.

She looked up. He was standing in the doorway like a man made of restraint—black sweatpants, crisp white tee, and zero mess. No chaos. No drama. Just fine as hell and emotionally regulated.

She tried to play it cool. "Yeah. Thanks."

He handed her the mug, then sat on the bed like he had a morning meeting with her soul.

"I have some time around two. I can send the car if you wanna come again."

Asha nodded. Sipped. Tried not to spiral.

When Asha didn't smile at the double entendre as Khalil expected, "You good?" he asked, glancing at her phone.

"Just spam," she lied.

He didn't press. Just brushed her thigh with his fingers and said, "Last night wasn't just a hookup, Asha. I don't waste my time."

She blinked. *Sir, why would you say that with your whole chest.*

"I will say it again. You're not a game. You are not disposable," he added, voice low. "Even if you're not looking for forever."

Her heart did a little cartwheel.

And just like that, I'm emotionally endangered.

Back at her walk-up in Bed-Stuy, Asha peeled off her "I was a good girl last night" dress and chucked her bra on the floor. She was about to crawl into bed when her phone lit up again.

Jayden 😈

> *Outside. Don't make me text your roommate.*

She groaned. "This man really thinks he's a rom-com villain."

She threw on sweats and flip-flops, no makeup, hair wild—zero effort. *Let him see what he lost.*

Jayden was posted up on her stoop, leaning against the railing like he'd been placed there by the gods of emotional chaos. Leather jacket, messy curls, and that smirk that used to undo her whole frontal lobe.

"You gonna make me stand here like a sad thirst trap?" he asked.

She folded her arms. "You are a sad thirst trap."

"You still fine," he said, eyes scanning her. "Even looking like you just ghosted your brush."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you want?"

Jayden shrugged. "Missed you."

"You miss *access to me*, not me."

That wiped the smile off his face. For two seconds, he looked real. "Nah. I miss us. Even when it was messy."

"It was always messy," she shot back. "You loved the drama more than you loved me."

He took a step closer. "You don't actually believe that."

"I don't know what to believe anymore. You dipped with no warning like a damn feed refresh. And now you wanna play 'hey stranger'?"

Jayden's jaw tightened. "You fucking him?"

"Not your business."

"That's a yes."

She didn't answer. Just stared him down.

"You think that clean-cut dude gets you? You think he knows how to handle all this?" He motioned toward her like she was both wildfire and altar.

She laughed, sharp. "What do you know about him? Wait a minute…how do you know about him? You know what it doesn't matter; at least he shows up."

Jayden flinched. Then, like he couldn't help himself, he stepped in and kissed her.

It hit like a flashback. Tongue. Teeth. Muscle memory. That same magnetic pull she hated and craved.

She shoved him back. “No.”

“Come on, Red…”

“I’m not her anymore.”

“Yes, you are,” he whispered. “You just forgot.”

Jayden. The same reckless Gemini swagger. The same scent—cologne, weed, and sin.

“You look so good,” he said, biting his lip.

“You look... like a mistake.”

He laughed. “You always say that before you kiss me.”

“I’m not kissing you.”

“C’mon, Red; you know, that bozo doesn’t know how to touch you the way I do.”

Her hand shot out—*slap*. Not hard enough to bruise, but enough to stun him.

His chest heaved, but his voice was calm. “You miss me. You’re just scared I’ll leave again.”

“I’m not scared,” she whispered.

“Yes, you are.” He stepped closer, eyes locked on hers. “Because you think if you let me in again, I’ll destroy you. And you’re probably right.” Jayden stepped closer and kissed her again.

Her back hit the wall in her hallway, his mouth crashing into hers. The kiss was all tongue and memory, a lightning bolt of lust and fury. She clutched his jacket, yanking him closer—and then shoved him away.

“Stop.” Her chest heaved. “You don’t get to come back like this. I’m not your favorite fucking game. I am not a toy you can just play with whenever you want and then throw down when you are bored.”

Jayden stared at her. For once, he didn’t smirk. “ Asha, please. I’ve never stopped thinking about you. You know I care about you; It just got so complicated and serious.”

“Jayden, get out! Get out now!” Asha growled low and dangerously. “Get out of my home! Get out of my life! Leave me alone!”

Tears welled behind her eyes, but she blinked them back. She didn’t cry over men anymore. Aries pride.

“You only want me now because someone else does.”

He didn’t deny it.

Jayden suddenly realized that Asha was serious. Years of drama and trauma informed him that he had pushed her too far, too fast, and said too much. Jayden threw up his hands and said quietly, “Okay, Red. I’m not here to make you mad; I just missed you. When you ready for me, text me. I’ll come.”

Asha slammed the door on his retreating figure. Then locked it. Twice.

As she turned, Asha caught a glance of herself in the mirror by the door. Asha simply stared at her reflection in the mirror, mascara smeared and smelling like the night before. “*Who are you and what are you doing with my life?”* she whispered.

After kicking Jayden out of her home, Asha walked slowly into her bathroom and turned on the hot water. The events of the last 24 hours were starting to come crashing down on her mind. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she showered in silence, scrubbing her skin raw. Every inch Khalil had kissed. Every part Jayden had manhandled. Though she washed away the traces of the night before, she could not wash away the fact that she was in deep, deep trouble. The memories of Khalil teasing and pleasing her willing body caught hold of her mind yet it was the gentle words he spoke before she left that echoed in her heart: *“you’re not a game. You are not disposable”.*

That night, she didn’t text Khalil. She went to bed in silence. But the city hummed under her skin, reminding her: desire is never tidy. Love is war.

And she was born for the battlefield.

The morning light crept in slowly through the tall windows of Khalil’s penthouse, washing the room in a soft, silver glow. Rain tapped gently on the glass, a quiet percussion to the stillness. The storm had passed in the night, but the air still carried the weight of something unsettled.

Asha sat curled at one end of the sleek leather couch, legs bare, one of Khalil’s black hoodies swallowing her frame. Her knees were pulled close to her chest, her face half-hidden behind a curtain of curls still tousled from the night before.

She wasn’t scrolling. Her phone lay face-down on the glass coffee table, buzzing now and again, the sound muffled by the soft jazz humming in the background. She didn’t flinch when it buzzed. She didn’t even glance at it.

Khalil had noticed that.

He moved around the kitchen with slow, deliberate grace, barefoot in gray sweatpants and a fitted tee that clung to his chest. He wasn't the kind of man who needed to fill silence. He let it stretch, listening with more than just ears.

He watched her, not in a way that pressed or pried — but with quiet attention. She hadn't said much since they woke up. Just a soft "morning" and a nod when he asked how she liked her coffee.

Black. No sugar.

Fitting.

He brought the mug to her without a word, placed it on a coaster near her hand, and sat beside her. Close, but not too close. He didn't touch her—not yet. Just let his presence speak for him.

She didn't move.

But her eyes, unfocused and far away, flicked briefly toward the coffee, then back to nowhere.

"You always get this quiet when your mind's somewhere else," Khalil said softly, his voice low and steady like the jazz music playing softly in the background.

Asha blinked, like she'd just realized she wasn't alone.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I'm just tired."

He tilted his head slightly, studying her face. "Nah. This ain't tired. This is heavy."

She gave a small, dry laugh. The kind that didn't reach her eyes. "Guess I'm not hiding it well."

"You're not supposed to," Khalil said simply.

He paused, letting his words settle before he added, "You don't have to explain it. But if you ever need to let it out—I got time. More than time. I got space for it. For you."

Asha turned her face to him then, slowly, as if unsure whether she should fall apart or fall into him.

Her voice cracked just slightly. "You ever feel like… everything's moving fast and slow at the same time?"

Khalil nodded. "All the time. That's when I remind myself—I don't have to fix the storm. I just gotta stay grounded."

He lifted his arm then, let it fall across the back of the couch, a quiet invitation. She shifted, leaned into his side, rested her head on his shoulder like it was the most natural thing in the world. His arm settled around her without hesitation.

She let out a long breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

The rain outside thickened, a soft rush against the glass. Her phone buzzed again.

Still, she didn’t reach for it.

Khalil didn’t ask.

Instead, his palm found her thigh—warm, solid, reassuring. Not possessive. Not controlling. Just… there.

Present.

Safe.

They sat like that for a while, no clock ticking, no pressure to move, just heartbeats and breath and the steady rhythm of rain.

“You’re different,” she whispered.

He didn’t ask what she meant. Just pulled her a little closer and kissed the top of her head.

“No,” he said gently. “I’m consistent. That’s what’s different.”

🖤

Asha didn’t reply. She didn’t need to.

For the first time in a long time, she felt held without being mishandled. Seen without being stared at. And maybe, just maybe, loved without being conquered.

She didn’t know what would happen next.

But right now?

She was choosing stillness.

And Khalil… he was already choosing her.

Asha’s thoughts started to unfurl as continue to lay within the comfort of Khalil’s arms. "Khalil doesn’t rush. He doesn’t chase me like Jayden does. He waits. Patient, steady—like a rock in this chaos. And honestly? That’s harder to resist than I thought. Maybe this slow burn is the real challenge."

BACKSLIDE BLUES

It happened on a Thursday night. Rain slicked the pavement outside of Asha's apartment. Asha had just left Khalil's bed—warm, safe, frustratingly calm—when she saw Jayden standing on her stoop with a hoodie pulled low, eyes reckless.

"You look good," he said in a voice steeped in old songs, bad habits, and empty promises.

"You still don't," she snapped, but she didn't walk away.

Jayden always knew where the cracks were. And Khalil? He didn't even know there was a door left open.

By 3am, Jayden was in her apartment, and Asha was breathless, shirt halfway off, memories pulling her under like undertow.

It felt like sin and nostalgia. It felt like drowning in your own weakness. It felt like the Backslide Blues.

I got those backslide blues,

Fallin' back into you

Told myself I was done

But look at what I do

You're a bad idea in a velvet groove

I get high off your touch, then drown in the truth

Oh, I got those...

Backslide blues

The city outside was still wide awake, but in Asha's apartment, time felt suspended. Heavy. Dangerous.

Asha stood at the window, barely lit by the soft glow of neon signs bleeding through the blinds. Rain tapped steady against the glass like a warning she wasn't listening to.

Behind her, Jayden moved like muscle memory—shirtless, sweatpants hanging low on his hips, his chain catching glints of streetlight. He didn't say much. He didn't have to.

That was always the problem.

Asha's hoodie—Khalil's hoodie—was balled up on the floor near her heels, and her conscience was trying to scream over the sound of her heartbeat.

Jayden came up behind her slow, like he was remembering her body one inch at a time. His hands found her hips, then her thighs, then slid up under the thin tank she wore like he'd never been gone.

"You always look good wet," he whispered against her neck.

She closed her eyes, jaw tight. "It's raining, Jayden."

He smirked, teeth grazing her shoulder. "Didn't say I was talkin' about the weather."

Her breath hitched. Her thighs pressed together. That damn spark was still there, sizzling beneath all the reasons she left.

His hands gripped her harder now, grounding her and teasing her all at once.

"You miss me?" he murmured.

"No."

"Liar."

He spun her around gently, lifting her onto the windowsill like she weighed nothing. Her legs opened for him without a second thought—body betraying mind, just like it always had.

"You still taste like caramel," he said, kissing down her collarbone.

She tensed slightly at the words and bit her lip hard enough to hurt. "And you still feel like a mistake."

But she didn't stop him.

She didn't want to.

Jayden knelt in front of her like he was praying, like she was the altar. His mouth, his tongue, his fingers—every part of him knew exactly where to go, exactly how to unravel her.

And Asha, fire sign and all, went willingly into the heat.

She gripped the back of his neck, thighs tight around him, voice low and ragged. "You can't fall asleep here."

Jayden stood, his mouth slick with sin, his eyes unreadable. "Why not?"

She hesitated.

Because if he stayed tonight, she'd stay wrong forever.

Because Khalil's text was still sitting on her screen, unopened.

Because she was tired of this loop, this shame, this sweet, addictive hell.

But at 3:00 a.m., with Jayden's hands on her skin and her dignity slipping through her fingers, none of that mattered.

So he stayed.

And in the dark, between kisses and regrets, the blues played loud in her chest.

I got those backslide blues,

Fallin' back into you

Told myself I was grown

But I do what I do

You're a shot of lust with no chaser to use

I say I'm healed, but the scar still moves

Oh, I got those...

Backslide blues

The morning after, Asha stood in front of the mirror, wrapped in Khalil's hoodie, guilt coiling around her throat like silk.

Khalil texted once: *"You okay?"*

She didn't respond.

Jayden kissed her shoulder, all cocky and soft. "We still fit don't we, huh?"

But *we* didn't. We didn't fit. We never fit. Asha's brain screamed.

Not really.

Asha didn't feel alive. She felt lost.

Jayden made her burn. Khalil made her bloom.

And now, she wasn't sure she deserved either.

I got those backslide blues,

One more night, one more bruise

You light my fire just to feel something true

But I know I'll be colder by noon

Baby, I got those...

Backslide blues

Yeah...

Backslide blues

Emotional Red Flags: Asha POV

The city outside Khalil's apartment was still waking up. Not with noise — not yet — but with a heavy kind of hush that felt like the exhale after a long cry. Rain tapped the windows with a lazy rhythm, and steam from the mug in my hands curled upward like incense in a church I didn't believe in anymore.

Khalil was still asleep, somewhere in the next room, wrapped in the sheets I should've been tangled in. I'd slipped out of bed an hour ago. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't sit still.

Not with my thoughts clawing at me like this.

I stood barefoot in the kitchen, one of his hoodies swallowing my frame, hair wild, heart heavier than it should've been after a night that sweet.

The thing is… I wanted to be present. I wanted to give Khalil the version of me that was healed, grounded, emotionally available. I wanted to *deserve* the softness he offered without flinching.

But Jayden's name still echoed in the corners of my soul.

Even when he wasn't around, he haunted the quiet.

And that — that was the first red flag I ever ignored.

Jayden wasn't love. He was a mirror.

He reflected all the things I never resolved — all the versions of me I thought I'd left behind. When he touched me, it wasn't just physical. It was psychological. Familiar. Toxic. Addictive. He didn't create my wounds — he just pressed his thumb on them and smiled when I winced.

Every time he left, it echoed someone else's rejection.

I hated how deep that truth ran.

It wasn't just about him ghosting me after a weekend together or canceling dates with no explanation. No — every time he walked away, it felt like my father forgetting my birthday again. Like my mama brushing off my tears because "strong girls don't cry." Like all the boys in high school who flirted in secret but wouldn't claim me out loud.

Jayden wasn't the first heartbreak.
He was just the most consistent one.

And every time I chased him, every time I let him back in with that sly grin and "you know I missed you" energy, I wasn't chasing closure.

I was chasing proof that I was worth staying for.

But damn… I'm tired of bleeding for proof.

I took a long sip of the coffee — bitter, black, hot — the way Khalil drank it. The way I was trying to learn to enjoy. It grounded me. Pulled me out of the spiral just enough to breathe.

The difference between Khalil and Jayden wasn't just in how they loved.

It was in what they triggered.

Jayden lit up my abandonment issues like fireworks. He made me feel like love was something I had to earn — to beg for, twist myself into knots for, endure pain for.

Khalil? He made love feel like something I already was.

He never pressed. Never pushed. He watched me with those slow, serious eyes like he saw the storm in me and still built the shelter anyway. When I didn't text back, he didn't spiral. When I got quiet, he got closer. Not loud — just *present.*

And presence is its own kind of safety.

I walked to the window and leaned my forehead against the cool glass. Below, the streets glistened — wet from the rain, shining in that sleepy, golden-blue morning way that made the city look almost soft.

But I didn't feel soft.

I felt like a wound on loop.

Like I'd been romanticizing dysfunction because it felt more intense than peace.

Because when you grow up around chaos, stillness can feel threatening. Boring, even. Jayden was chaos with a six-pack and perfect timing. And I kept mistaking adrenaline for love.

I kept mistaking pain for depth.

But love doesn't have to hurt to feel real.

I thought back to the last night I spent with Jayden — the last *real* night. The one where he pulled me into my apartment at 3:00 a.m. and kissed me like I was still his, even though we both knew better. The way he undressed me with urgency, not reverence. The way he touched me like he needed to win something, not worship someone.

I let him. I let him every time. Because my body still hadn't caught up with what my spirit was trying to leave behind.

But when I woke up with him in my bed the next morning, staring at that same cracked ceiling fan I always woke up under, I didn't feel sexy.

I felt sick.

Like I'd traded pieces of my healing for one more hit of him.

It wasn't even about him anymore. It was about the pattern.

The shame of staying. The pride of surviving. The exhaustion of doing both.

A buzz pulled me out of my thoughts. I turned around, heart thudding in my chest, hoping it wasn't what I thought it was.

It was.

Jayden. A text.
"Miss your mouth."

That was it.

That was all he had to say.

And for a long minute, I stared at the screen.

I could feel the old reflex rising — the one that wanted to flirt back, to pretend I had control, to prove I wasn't pressed.

But I was.

Pressed. Tired. Numb.

I put the phone down.

Not face down — just down.

No dramatics. No overthinking.

I just didn't respond.

I didn't owe him my softness anymore.

I didn't owe him anything.

A few minutes later, Khalil's footsteps padded softly into the room. He didn't say anything. Just wrapped his arms around my waist from behind and kissed the space between my shoulder blades.

"Everything good?" he asked gently.

I nodded.

For the first time in a long time, I wasn't lying.

Jayden was a mirror.
But Khalil was a window.
And me?
I was finally walking toward the light.

Emotional Red Flags: Khalil's POV

She's standing in my kitchen, barefoot, wearing my hoodie like she owns it.

I like how that looks on her—how soft she gets when she thinks no one's watching. But this morning, she ain't soft. She's tight. Wound up. Eyes a little too far away.

She's here. But not really.

Her coffee's gone cold. She's just holding it like it's something to do with her hands.

And I know better than to ask.

Some people talk to be understood.
Others need silence to feel safe enough to say anything at all.
Asha is the second kind.

I lean against the doorway, arms crossed, just watching her breathe.

She don't know I'm up yet. Don't know I've been awake since the rain started. I felt her slip out of bed. Not fast. Not guilty. Just… quietly.

She's been doing that more lately.

Pulling back, but not all the way.

Staying just close enough to pretend she's still mine.

Truth is, I don't need her to explain. I feel it.

She's somewhere else.

She's got that look in her eyes again—the one she gets when she's remembering something she don't wanna remember, or craving something she don't wanna crave.

I don't take it personal.
But that don't mean it don't sting.

I step forward, slow. She doesn't flinch, just glances back over her shoulder like she's expecting me to say something she's not ready to answer.

I don't.

I just wrap my arms around her waist from behind and rest my chin on her shoulder.

"Everything good?" I ask.

Her nod is too quick. "Yeah. Just thinking."

I hum low in my throat. I don't press.

Because I know what this is.

This is the part where I remind her what peace feels like.

I press a kiss to the back of her neck. She relaxes—barely. Just a little. But enough.

I breathe her in.

She still smells like last night.

Like sweat and caramel and heat.

But her spirit?
That's somewhere else entirely.

It’s not my job to fix that.
I know this.

But damn if it doesn’t ache, loving someone who still hasn’t figured out they’re worthy of peace.

I think she’s used to chaos.
Used to having to fight for affection.
Used to being kept in the margins.

And me?

I don’t keep people in pieces.
If I love you, you get the whole structure.

And she doesn’t know what to do with that.
With someone steady.
Someone who ain’t gonna walk out when she gets loud, or complicated, or scared.

I can feel her pulling back into herself now, like she’s trying to shrink so I don’t notice she’s slipping.

But I do.

I always do.

The thing is… I’m not mad.

I’ve known from the beginning that this woman is still healing.
Still breaking habits she didn’t choose.
Still unlearning the way certain hands only held her to keep her from leaving, not to make her feel safe.

That’s not who I am.

I’m not here to hold her hostage.
I’m here to hold her steady.

Even if it means she has to leave to learn the lesson.

Even if it means she slips back into the arms of a man who only knows how to feed her wounds.

Because here’s the truth no one likes to admit:

Sometimes, love isn’t enough.

Sometimes, timing matters more than chemistry.
Sometimes, you’re the right man for the woman… but not the right man for her patterns.

And healing?

Healing don't happen on a schedule.

I slide my hand up under the hoodie and rest it just below her ribs. Not sexual. Just grounding.

She leans back into me just slightly. That's all I get. And that's okay.

She's quiet for a long time. Then finally says, "You ever feel like you're trying to outrun something that keeps catching up?"

I don't ask what she's talking about.

Because I already know.

I just nod and say, "Yeah. But eventually, you stop running. Let it catch you. Let it say what it needs to say. Then you look it in the face and walk away different."

She closes her eyes.

And for the first time all morning, she breathes.

Not shallow.
Not sharp.
Just breath.

Real and slow and full.

I don't know what tomorrow brings. I don't know if she's gonna walk back into her past one more time before she decides to let it go.

But I do know this:

I'm not going anywhere.

And she'll never have to chase me to find out.

THIS IS ME TELLING YOU

It was late afternoon when I finally broke.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Just… quiet.

The kind of breaking that feels like telling the truth for the first time in too long.

I was sitting on the edge of Khalil's bed, hoodie sleeves covering my hands, eyes locked on a crack in the hardwood floor like it had something to offer me. Like it could hold the words I didn't know how to say.

Khalil sat across the room in his reading chair, legs stretched out, fingers flipping the pages of a business report. He hadn't spoken in a while. He was giving me space—like always.

But I could feel him watching me.

Not with judgment.

With patience.

Like he knew the words were bubbling up, and he wasn't gonna yank them out. Just let me bring them when I was ready.

And God, I was tired of holding them in.

"I need to tell you something," I said, my voice barely there.

Khalil slowly put the report on the table and looked at me fully.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm listening."

I swallowed. My throat was tight. My fingers clenched around each other.

"I saw someone," I whispered. "A few weeks ago."

His face didn't change.

Not in that suspicious way. Not angry. Just still.

"An ex?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Jayden?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "You knew?"

"I didn't know," he said, shrugging one shoulder. "But I figured."

"Why?"

Khalil exhaled slowly. "Because sometimes… you leave like you're chasing peace, but come back like you lost a war."

My heart cracked open at that.

“I wasn’t planning to see him,” I said. “I didn’t even know I still could. I thought I was done.”

“You don’t have to explain,” he said gently.

“No.” I looked up at him. “I want to.”

He nodded once.

So I told him.

I told him about the night Jayden texted. I told him how I shut Jayden out on the first visit. But then I told him about the second visit. About how easy it was to slip, how fast I forgot myself the second Jayden touched me like nothing had changed.

I told him I hated how it still felt like fire. Like addiction. Like drowning in a body I used to worship and a lie I used to believe.

“I felt disgusting afterward,” I said. “Not because of him. Because of me. Because I knew better.”

Khalil didn’t flinch.

He just leaned forward slightly, forearms on his knees, eyes locked on mine.

“I thought if I told you, you’d think I was broken,” I added, voice small. “Like I’m not ready for you. For this. For someone who actually shows up.”

He looked at me for a long time.

Then said, “Nah.”

“‘Nah’?”

“You’re not broken, Asha. You’re just still healing.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I didn’t even fight them.

“I wanted you to be the clean slate,” I said, sniffling. “But I brought so much baggage.”

“You brought you,” he said. “That’s all I asked for.”

That undid me.

I covered my face and cried — full-body, gut-deep tears. The kind I never let anyone see. The kind Jayden would’ve called “too much.”

Khalil didn’t rush me. He didn’t smother me. He came and sat beside me, then pulled me into his arms and let me fall apart right there on his chest.

And when I was done shaking, he kissed the top of my head and whispered, “You don’t ever have to earn being loved here.”

I held him tighter.

Because that was the moment I knew I wasn’t just letting go of Jayden.

I was letting go of needing to prove I was worth keeping.

BUILT TO BE STILL

She was still in my arms, breathing soft and uneven against my chest. The tears had stopped, but I could tell her body hadn’t caught up yet.

When Asha cries, she doesn’t ask for comfort. She doesn’t reach. She curls in, like she’s used to doing it alone. I’d watched her do it three times now. Tonight was the first time she let me hold her through it.

I didn’t say much.

Didn’t need to.

Her honesty hit me in the chest, sharp and fragile. She’d just handed me a part of her that was still bleeding, still bruised, still scared to be seen.

And I held it.

Carefully.

But I could feel something hanging in the air between us. Unsaid.

I wasn’t just the strong one. I was also the quiet one. And Asha? She didn’t just want safety. She wanted to *know* me. Fully. Not the curated version. Not the man with the calm voice and the steady presence.

She wanted to know what lived underneath.

So I gave it to her.

“You know,” I said softly, “since we’re being real… I should probably tell you something too.”

She lifted her head, eyes still glassy. “What?”

I looked past her, into the dark window where our reflections flickered faintly.

“I’ve spent most of my life being the ‘safe’ one,” I said. “The one people vent to. The one who doesn’t raise his voice. The one who doesn’t get caught up in drama or react emotionally.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” she said gently.

“No. It’s not,” I agreed. “But it’s not always honest, either.”

She tilted her head, curious now.

“I learned early to keep things in. To keep things smooth. I watched my mom get torn apart by a man who screamed,slapped and punched every time he felt powerless. And I promised myself I’d never be like him.”

Asha reached for my hand, silent.

“So I became still,” I said. “Too still. I taught myself not to need too much. Not to want too loud. Not to be disappointed. Because that meant control. And control felt safe.”

I took a breath.

“But underneath that control… I get lonely. Real lonely. I don’t let people in. Not really. Because if you’re calm all the time, nobody checks on you. They just assume you’re good.”

Asha’s eyes softened.

“I dated someone once who told me I was boring,” I said with a hollow laugh. “She said I was emotionally flat. That I didn’t fight for her the way she wanted. But the truth was, I just didn’t want to fight. I didn’t know how to be loud and still feel safe.”

Asha traced her thumb along my knuckle.

“I’ve been overlooked before. Because I wasn’t flashy. Because I didn’t chase. Because I didn’t perform intensity the way some people expect. But the truth is… I feel things deep. I just do it quiet.”

She leaned her head against my shoulder.

“I never want you to feel like you gotta earn your place with me,” I said. “But I also don’t want you to think I’m not human. I get scared, too. I get hurt, frustrated, and angry just like you. I just wear it different.”

We sat in that quiet place for a moment.

Then she whispered, “So what are you scared of now?”

I exhaled.

“That I’ll love you more than you’re ready to be loved,” I admitted. “That I’ll pour in steady, and you’ll still go back to what feels familiar. And I’ll be left holding peace that nobody wanted. I am afraid you will fuck my life up and leave.”

Her breath hitched.

I looked at her. “I’m not scared of you leaving. I’m scared of me staying too long, silently breaking, waiting for you to choose me with your whole chest.”

Tears welled in her eyes again, and she didn’t even try to stop them this time.

“Thank you for telling me,” she whispered. “Thank you for letting me see you.”

“I want you to,” I said. “Not just the part that’s patient. The part that bleeds too.”

She kissed my palm, slow and soft.

And just like that, something shifted.

Not fixed. Not finished.

But real.

This wasn’t about being perfect.
It was about being honest.
About choosing to stand still, not out of fear, but from strength.
And letting her meet me there.

ASHA’s Confession

As the sun was ducking behind the skyline, casting everything in that dusty pink-blue twilight, the conversation between Asha and Khalil had deepened the bond between them. As they sat on Khalil’s building rooftop with No wine, No music, and no other outside distractions,a calmness connected them like the sex never had.

Asha had asked to come up here. Needed air. Needed sky. Needed distance from the version of herself that was always fighting to look like she had it together, like she was always winning.

Khalil was next to me, quiet. Comfortable in the silence. Not pushing. Not guessing. Just waiting.

And that — that made it harder.

“I think I ruin good things,” I said finally, my voice barely above the breeze.

Khalil didn’t move, but I felt him turn slightly, his attention sharpening.

I licked my lips, heart pounding, but I didn’t stop.

“Not on purpose,” I added. “But I see good… and I panic.”

He was quiet, so I kept going.

“It’s like... the second someone offers me love, real love—not lust or games or chaos—but peace, consistency, intention? My body short-circuits. I don’t trust it. I don’t trust *me*.”

Still no judgment on his face.

Just presence.

“Maybe it’s Venus retrograde. Maybe it’s just my f***ed up wiring,” I said with a bitter little laugh. “But I self-sabotage. And I do it well.”

Khalil raised an eyebrow, but he let me talk.

“I pick fights that don’t need to be picked. I shut down when I should open up. I answer texts from men who never deserved my time. And I call it freedom when really, it’s fear.”

I felt my chest tighten, like I was confessing a crime.

“I think I’m afraid of being loved,” I said finally. “Because then I have to believe I’m worthy of it.”

Khalil reached over and took my hand. Didn’t interrupt. Didn’t offer platitudes. Just held me there.

That broke me open a little more.

“I’ve made some messy-ass decisions, Khalil,” I admitted. “Not just Jayden. Other men. Other moments I don’t talk about. Nights I called empowerment but woke up feeling like trash.”

His thumb moved across the back of my hand, slow.

“And I say I’m passionate — and yeah, I am — but sometimes that passion turns volatile. I lash out. I disappear. I say things I don’t mean. I run hot, and I don’t always care who gets burned.”

I shook my head.

“I’ve ghosted good people. I’ve clung to bad ones. I’ve talked myself into being okay with crumbs, and then pushed away the full meal when it showed up.”

Now the tears were in my throat again, thick and hot.

“I don’t want to do that to you,” I whispered.

He didn’t speak right away. Just looked at me like he saw all the ugly and still wasn’t blinking.

Then, finally, Khalil leaned in.

“You think I don’t see that you’re scared?” he asked.

I looked down, but he tilted my chin up.

“I know you’re scared, Asha. I’ve been scared too. But fear isn’t a deal-breaker. It’s just a place we start from.”

I swallowed hard.

“I’ve seen you try to outrun yourself,” he continued. “I’ve seen you armor up. I’ve seen the fire in you when you’re pushing me away and praying I don’t let go.”

Tears slipped out, and I let them fall.

“I’m not here for your perfect,” he said. “I’m here for your real.”

The wind picked up just a little, brushing my hair across my cheeks, and he tucked it behind my ear without hesitation.

“I can’t promise I’ll never fumble,” I said quietly. “But I’m trying. I’m tired of losing myself in the chase. Tired of running from the good.”

“I know,” he said. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

The silence that followed wasn’t heavy. It was holy.

We sat there, fingers tangled, dusk settling into night. And for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel like my chaos was something I had to hide.

I felt seen. Held.

Loved, even in the undoing.

THE QUESTION WAS IF…

I didn’t expect to sleep over.

I didn’t pack a bag. Didn’t bring a bonnet. Just the soft ache of truth on my lips and the lingering warmth of Khalil’s hand in mine as we came down from the rooftop, the city curling into itself beneath us like a secret.

The hallway to his apartment felt longer than usual. Not because of distance — but because I wasn't walking into the same space I'd left.

Something had shifted between us. And this time, it wasn't subtle.

He unlocked the door and held it open. I stepped in, barefoot, hoodie still hanging off one shoulder like my armor had finally loosened.

He watched me. Not like a man waiting for a moment to pounce. Like a man reading a sacred text. Slowly. Reverently.

"Khalil," I said, just above a whisper, as the door clicked shut behind him.

He raised an eyebrow, mouth soft, eyes curious.

"The question was never *if* I'd fall for you," I said, swallowing. "It was *when.*"

His breath held. Just slightly.

I took a step closer.

"I think I've been in slow motion," I continued. "Trying to outrun gravity. But you… you've been steady. Constant. I wasn't falling *toward* you. I was falling *into* myself. And you were just… already there. Khalil, I love you."

Khalil didn't say anything at first. He just walked up to me, closed the space between us, and touched the side of my face like I was something delicate—but not fragile.

"I knew," he murmured. "From that first night on my couch when you wouldn't talk, wouldn't look at me, but still didn't leave."

I smiled — small and trembling. "I didn't have the words then."

"You do now," he said. "And they're beautiful."

His lips brushed mine — slow, not hungry. Like a promise. Like permission. Like patience dressed in skin and warmth.

I kissed him back with everything that was soft in me. Not the fire I was known for. Not the frantic lust that used to keep me spinning. This was surrender. The kind that doesn't beg. The kind that doesn't barter. Just… *trusts.*

He kissed my collarbone like a prayer.

Unzipped the hoodie like an offering.

Each layer came off with reverence, not rush.

And when we made love — because that's what this was — it felt like quiet thunder. Like something rebuilding instead of destroying. His hands knew my edges but didn't flinch at the cracks.

Khalil touched me like he was planting flowers in fertile earth.

And I bloomed.

Later, when the city had gone fully dark and my limbs were tangled with his, I lay in the silence, heart loud in my chest.

His fingers traced circles into the dip of my waist, and I turned to face him.

"I'm not used to this," I admitted.

"This?" he asked, voice low, sleepy.

"Being seen. And not being punished for it."

He kissed my forehead.

"I don't punish people for being human," he said. "I just want to love the real you."

And in that moment, I knew.

The question was never if I'd choose him.

The question was when I'd finally stop choosing pain instead.

The FINAL CONFRONTATION

The sun was too bright for this kind of confrontation.

I wasn't wearing armor — just a cotton dress, gold hoops, and a calm I had worked hard for. My iced coffee was halfway done, condensation dripping onto the table outside the café. Khalil had just gone inside to grab a slice of banana bread for us to split.

I was in a good mood. No, better than good. I was *still* inside.

That quiet kind of happiness that doesn't need to announce itself.

And that's when I felt the shift.

I didn't hear him first. I *felt* him.

Jayden.

That old rhythm my body used to know like a second language before I ever understood the words: run, ache, beg, repeat.

I turned my head, and there he was.

Dark skin kissed by sun, a gray tshirt hanging off his frame like he still didn't care about looking put together. The same gold chain. The same half-smirk he used to wear when he thought I was still his, even when he hadn't shown up for weeks.

"Asha," he said like it tasted good to say my name again.

I blinked once. "Jayden."

He sat down across from me like we were mid-conversation. Like months hadn't passed. Like I hadn't peeled him off my skin one memory at a time.

"You look good," he said, voice low and too familiar.

I looked him straight in the eye. "I feel better."

He studied me. That smirk wavered.

"I been thinkin' about you," he started.

"I know," I said. "You text when you miss control."

That shut him up for half a second.

He leaned back. "I didn't come here to fight."

"You never do," I said coolly. "You come to pull."

Silence stretched between us.

Then he leaned in again, elbows on the table, eyes sharp. "You really think that dude is gonna keep you satisfied? He don't know you like I do."

I didn't flinch.

"He doesn't need to know the version of me you knew," I said. "Because I'm not her anymore."

He scoffed. "Nah. You still fire. Still temperamental. Still addicted to intensity."

"And you're still arrogant," I snapped. "Still showing up when it's too late. Still mistaking your pull for power."

He sat back, jaw tight now.

I lowered my voice, but kept it steady. “Jayden, we were never love. We were chemistry and chaos. That’s not the same thing.”

His eyes narrowed. “So what, he tamed you?”

“No,” I said. “He saw me. And I chose to stop hiding behind the idea that love’s only real if it hurts.”

That hit. I saw it land.

And I wasn’t done.

“I chased you for years thinking one day I could be enough for you,” I said. “But you never withheld because I lacked. You withheld because it kept me hungry.”

He opened his mouth to defend himself, but I raised my hand.

“You’re not evil. Just broken. And I tried to warm you by catching myself on fire.”

I stood up, coffee in hand, heart steady.

“I don’t hate you, Jayden,” I said. “But I’m not yours to circle back to anymore.”

That’s when Khalil walked out — calm, confident, two slices of banana bread in hand.

He clocked Jayden immediately, then looked at me.

“You good?” Khalil asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. We were just done.”

Khalil didn’t puff his chest or size Jayden up.

He didn’t need to.

His presence alone said, *I’m here. She’s safe. We’re not pressed.*

Jayden stood slowly, his mask cracked now, his eyes unsure.

“Word. You really done with me? For real this time?” he asked.

I smiled, broad and real. “The part of me that needed the shit-utationship? Yes; she is done with you for real this time. She’s gone.”

And just like that, I grabbed Khalil’s open hand and walked away.

ROOFTOP FIRE

It started with a text.

“Come up. Dress warm.”

I didn’t ask questions. I just changed into his hoodie — his favorite one I always wore — and thick socks, then made my way up the stairs, my heart already beating like it knew something was waiting.

When I opened the rooftop door, I stopped breathing for a second.

He’d transformed the space.

String lights zigzagged overhead, casting golden puddles of warmth onto the rooftop. A fire pit glowed in the center. Two chairs, thick blankets, vinyl playing some soft Coltrane in the background.

And Khalil — standing by the railing in a blue hoodie, hands in his pockets, watching the skyline like it was whispering something only he could hear.

He turned the second I stepped out. His smile was slow and real.

“You did all this?” I asked, stepping toward him.

He shrugged. “Just thought the city deserved some competition.”

I laughed, but my chest felt tight. Good tight. Like something was about to happen in the best possible way.

We sat by the fire, the city below us moving slow and quiet. No chaos. No noise. Just us, finally steady.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, leaning back.

“Dangerous,” I teased.

He grinned. “Facts. But seriously…”

His hand found mine under the blanket.

“I used to think peace meant boredom. Like if nothing’s burning, it’s not love.”

I looked at him. “Same.”

“But then you,” he said simply. “You walked into my life like a storm. But you stayed like a prayer.”

My breath caught.

“I’ve watched you fight demons I’ll never fully understand,” he said. “But you never let them win. And somewhere in the middle of all your fire, I found home.”

I didn’t speak. I couldn’t.

He stood slowly, then turned to me and pulled a small box from his hoodie pocket.

My heart hit my ribs.

“Khalil—”

He knelt. Right there on the concrete roof. In the glow of our fire and the hum of midnight Brooklyn.

He didn’t rush. He didn’t perform.

He just looked up at me like I was sacred.

“I’m not promising perfection,” he said. “I’m not even promising that we’ll never argue, or trip, or hit walls. But I promise this…”

He opened the box. A ring. Simple, stunning, gold with a 3 carat diamond stone that sparkled under the city lights.

“I will always choose you with both hands. Even when you’re scared. Even when I’m scared. Even when it’s messy. I will stand 10 toes down to protect you and honor you.”

Tears blurred the skyline.

“I don’t want a quiet life,” he said. “I want a full one. And I want it with you.”

I didn’t even feel the tears fall — they just *came.*

“I’ve waited my whole life to feel safe like this,” I whispered. “And I’ve run from it so many times, I forgot how to stand still. But you… you taught me how to breathe again.”

He smiled, still down on one knee.

“So what do you say, Asha Fierce? You tryna marry a calm, grown-ass Capricorn or what?”

I laughed through the tears.

“Hell yes.”

I tackled him before he could even stand, knocking us both back into laughter and warmth and the crackle of the fire.

He slid the ring onto my finger — and it fit like something that was always supposed to be there.

The rooftop felt like church.

The fire was warm, but not wild.

The night held us.

Not as a beginning or an ending — but as a promise:

This is what love looks like when it stops begging to be enough and simply becomes *true*.

The city was alive — buzzing and shimmering beneath a late afternoon sun that promised golden hour magic.

Our rooftop was transformed again, but this time, not just with string lights and a fire pit.

There were flowers — wild and free, just like the love that had grown between Khalil and me.

Friends and family had gathered in a semicircle around us, laughter and whispered stories weaving between the beats of a live saxophone.

I felt the familiar flutter of nerves, but it wasn't the old kind. Not the jittery panic of someone who'd been bruised by love before. This was different. This was hope.

Khalil stood at the edge of the rooftop, hands in his pockets but eyes locked on me like I was the only person in the world.

My dress was simple but elegant — soft white that caught the breeze, flowing like the new chapter we were writing.

I took a deep breath, remembering every step that led me here:

The heartbreak.

The chaos.

The nights of running and the moments of standing still.

The rooftop confessions.

The proposal beneath the stars.

And now — this.

He smiled as I walked toward him, slow and steady.

Our hands found each other like a promise.

The officiant’s voice was warm and steady as she spoke words that felt like they belonged just to us.

But the real vows were the ones we whispered, eyes locked, hearts bare.

“I promise to hold your fire,” Khalil said, voice low and sure. “To protect it and never ask you to dim it for me.”

I smiled, tears prickling my eyes.

“And I promise,” I said, “to meet you in the quiet, to breathe with you when the world gets loud, and to never run from the love we’ve fought so hard to build.”

He slipped the ring on my finger — the mate to the one he’d given me months ago, shining brighter than ever.

We kissed.

Slow and sweet and full of everything we’d been through.

The city seemed to exhale around us, the sun dipping behind the skyline like it was blessing our union.

We danced — just us — beneath the stars and string lights.

And for once, the only thing on fire was the love we chose to keep burning.